

Reflective Student Practitioner – an example integrating clinical experience into the curriculum

Claire Sparrow, University of Portsmouth

Abstract

This project began in 2004 and involves LLB students training (in year two) and then acting as Citizens Advice Bureau ('CAB') advisers for 120 hours (in year three).

We have been able to incorporate this work into the existing course structure fully in third year (40 credit 'Reflective Student Practitioner' unit) and partially in second year (as part of a 10 credit Careers and Research Management unit), so that students undertake a substantial proportion of this work for credit. This has been possible by creating a parallel and alternative route to the existing 40 credit Legal Dissertation. Assessment in third year is by way of a 3000 word legal essay (based on a legal topic raised in client interviews); a 3000 word reflective analysis of their experience, a journal and three letters that they have drafted in their CAB work. This is produced through one-to-one supervision – in much the same way as one would supervise a dissertation.

Our aims in this project were to give students the opportunity to learn skills which would be of benefit in their professional lives, improve their employability and allow them to become more engaged in their local community. Portsmouth CAB was in need of more advisers and was interested in recruiting younger volunteers to establish a broader mix of advisers. The guarantee of 120 hours was a valuable commitment to them.

I would propose to offer an explanation of how we manage our relationship with Portsmouth CAB and how we share responsibilities between us (for example, in training and

recruitment). I would also seek to evaluate what has worked well and what has been problematic in working with CAB.

Introduction

The University of Portsmouth CAB project was first piloted in 2004 by our now Head of Law School, Caroline Strevens. It sprang from a good contact within CAB, Eileen Higham, who had recently been appointed as the Service Manager of the Portsmouth CAB. This CAB was experiencing problems in recruiting and keeping a sufficiently large group of volunteers to staff the Bureau. One of the chief reasons for this was that the most ready source of volunteers – retired people – were choosing to use their time differently. Many more people are finding that they need to continue in paid employment – or that they simply want to travel and enjoy their leisure time in other ways. In 2004, Portsmouth CAB had a small core of advisers, some of whom were wishing to reduce their commitment to the Bureau as they got older.

Law students at the University were obvious candidates to fill some of these vacancies. The benefits to them, in terms of seeing the law in context and developing skills valuable to lawyers is probably so obvious to delegates that it hardly needs to be explained at length. What may be of interest is how we made use of this opportunity and the practical challenges and decisions that we had to make in incorporating volunteering into the curriculum.

What is the project?

Presently, students who wish to take the CAB route will choose to do so at the beginning of their second year. The CAB is bound by its own internal audit requirements and so every potential adviser must submit an application form and be interviewed to check suitability.

This happens in the first few weeks of semester one in year two. CAB staff come into the University and spend a few days interviewing the students and making decisions.

Once accepted as trainee advisers, students have to complete the same CAB training process that all volunteer advisers must undertake. They complete a series of 'training packs' produced by CAB and record their progress in Records of Learning ('RLs'). The training packs cover matters as diverse as 'Aims, policies and principles' and 'Calculating Benefits'. There are four RLs in total before the trainee can become fully fledged as an adviser. The first two are completed using mostly paper training packs. The last two focus more on practice as an adviser and demonstrating competence in early interviews.

Each trainee must have a Guidance Tutor appointed by the Bureau. In our case, two members of staff have undertaken training to become advisers themselves and have been appointed the Guidance Tutors to the students. They initially supervise the completion of the first two RLs in weekly workshops held throughout the students' second year.

There are various training courses that students must also attend. The longest is four days and introduces students to the skills that they will need when advising. They undertake role plays and discuss their concerns with the leader of the course and fellow student trainees. When this course is completed, they are able to progress into the third RL and supervised interviews. From this point in the training, CAB staff rather than University tutors, act as Guidance Tutors. Once they have conducted three observed interviews, the CAB Guidance Tutor will decide if the student is ready to start interviewing alone and to start the final RL. To complete this, the student must undertake a case in a certain number of different areas of advice, such as housing, debt, etc.

Once the fourth RL has been completed, then the student is a fully qualified CAB Generalist Adviser. We expect this stage to be reached either during the summer before they begin their third year or early on in the third year.

Once qualified, students are able to begin their 120 hours of advising in Bureau, which they will need to complete by the end of their third year.

Why have we integrated this into the curriculum?

As is apparent from the description of the process above, CAB training is time consuming. We had first asked for volunteers from the LLB courses to undertake the CAB training alongside other trainee volunteers. This would be extra-curricular and not for credit. Two volunteers, both mature students, decided to go ahead with this. However, CAB training was scheduled throughout teaching weeks and often clashed with the students' other classes. CAB was unhappy with their attendance and the students struggled. Following discussions with CAB, one way forward was to find a way of fitting the training and volunteering into the curriculum so that the students gained space in their timetables and also received credit for what they were doing. It also had the benefit of allowing University resources to be set aside – not least staff time to train as advisers and to act as Guidance Tutors.

How have we integrated it into the curriculum?

A student taking the CAB route would do as follows:

Second Year

Careers and Research Management Unit

This unit is a second semester unit only. For most students, this unit covers careers guidance and also the preparation and submission of a research proposal for the Legal Project or Legal Dissertation in their final year. 90% of the unit mark attaches to the proposal. For students on the CAB route, they do not undertake the research proposal. Instead, they give a 15 minute group presentation reflecting on their experience of training to become a CAB Adviser. 90% of the unit mark then attaches to this presentation.

Workshops are timetabled throughout the year for the CAB students, where they can come and complete the RLs and have them signed off by the University Guidance Tutors. This means that they will still work harder than non-CAB students who will only have lectures and seminars in this unit in semester two.

CAB students will also need to get into the Bureau so that they can observe interviews and other Bureau procedures. They will also attend the four day skills course at the beginning of semester two.

If students find that they have made a wrong decision and do not wish to proceed with the CAB route, then they are able to switch back to the non-CAB route simply by rejoining those students who are preparing their research proposals.

Third Year

CAB students taking this unit for credit will go on to take the Reflective Student Practitioner unit in year three. This is an alternative to the 40 credit Legal Dissertation.

By the end of this year, students are required to have completed their 120 hours of advising in Bureau. They have the flexibility to complete these hours over the summer before their third year if they live locally – or to work on it throughout third year. The Bureau monitors and

counts the hours that the student attends. Some students have the opportunity to specialise further – whether in debt work or supporting the CAB Court Desk at Portsmouth County Court.

Assessment in the Reflective Student Practitioner unit

As in placements, students would keep a diary of what happened and what they thought about these events. They would have to produce examples of documents drafted on behalf of clients which demonstrated their ‘lawyering skills’. However, we also wanted students to produce something law-related (not all advice areas in the CAB are primarily based on law) so that it could be more effectively moderated by an external examiner. We also wanted a piece of work which demonstrated genuine depth of reflection. We decided on two 3000 word essays which would between them attract 80% of the overall unit mark.

The first piece is a 3000 word essay which evaluates an area of law (chosen by the student) using the student’s experience within CAB. For example, the student may have advised clients who came into the Bureau with problems with bailiffs. The student would then identify that there was a problem with the law in this area and begin to research it and explore reform. This is much like a normal analytical law essay – the difference being that it is stimulated by the student’s experience and his or her awareness of how the law is affecting members of the local community. Another benefit of this assessment artefact is that it allows students to engage in more traditional self-directed legal research. Students also identify a broader range of topics than one might see, for example, in the Legal Project or Dissertation.

In terms of reflection, while trainee advisers are encouraged to assess their skills and progress as they complete their training, this self assessment and structured reflection stops once they are qualified advisers. We therefore asked for a 3000 word reflective critique of the student’s

experience as part of the assessment in this unit. As teaching and assessing reflection is an area of interest to Caroline Strevens and myself, we set out to teach the students how to write reflectively. This involved workshops where we explained what we were looking for and also an introduction to the work of academics in the field such as Donald Schon, David Kolb, Georgina Ledvinka and Jenny Moon. This year we were also able to show students excerpts from past reflective critiques to highlight good practice. What we wanted to achieve was something beyond the student identifying how he or she felt and what needed to be done to improve his or her performance as a CAB adviser. The best pieces of reflective writing went through stages where they reflected on how they felt at the time of the event, how they felt after some time had passed and then finally on what this whole process told them about themselves as learners. We wanted them to identify how they improved their performance in Bureau, but also to look at what they had learned that would be of benefit outside that context – such as greater confidence or independence of thought. The reflective critiques would also demonstrate some understanding of the academic theories about learning from experience and the value of reflection.

Other than workshops (of which there were about two per semester) students were assigned a supervisor (one of the members of staff who had previously acted as a Guidance Tutor in year two). In producing the two 3000 word essays, students used these supervisors in the same way that they would a Dissertation supervisor – meeting regularly to discuss drafts and improvement of work. One of the most enjoyable aspects of teaching on this unit is the ability to talk to students in depth about their experiences and seeing them become more questioning and actively engaged with making sense of those experiences.

Student Feedback on reflective writing

There has been much positive feedback for the learning from experience units although it is clear that students do find reflective writing very difficult since it is so unlike any assessment task they have previously undertaken. They comment:

The best part of the unit was:

Hands on experience, improving career prospects. Reflective method of assessment has really helped me identify what I've learnt/ how I've improved.

Doing practical experience, I have gained an insight how the law works in practice.

Generally:

This unit has probably been the most important, valuable unit I have undertaken at uni. It has helped me identify key areas of law I would like to work in & also, particularly, taught me how to cope in stressful situations.

A great way to develop and acquire new skills through experience – for me it was a great opportunity to familiarise myself with community issues.

The negative comments mostly concerned the amount of work involved and how it would have compared to the workload involved in taking the dissertation unit.

It seems clear that while these students have had to work harder than traditional Legal Project or Dissertation students, they have gained something far more.

Other fringe benefits

We have benefited up to this year from inclusion in the Millennium Volunteers Scheme being run by the Government. This recognizes the achievement of volunteers under the age of 25 by awarding certificates for 100 and 200 hours of service. Of perhaps more practical benefit for the CAB, it also attracts some funding for each eligible volunteer.

A recent welcome development has been confirmation that our student CAB volunteers will also receive a Certificate of Advisory Practice from the Institute of Paralegals. They will also receive a year's membership of the Institute, joining at Associate level. This will allow them to use the letters A.Inst.Pa after their names and the professional designation 'Associate Paralegal'. Their hours spent doing CAB work will count as qualifying employment, fast-tracking them for Fellowship/Certified Paralegal status.

Both of these certificates are awarded in separate ceremonies on the day of Graduation.

Challenges

This project has worked so far because both sides gain benefits. The Bureau has a regular supply of trained advisers all committed to 120 hours at least. They also have University Guidance Tutors to take some of the weight of constant training of new volunteers from them. The University benefits from the opportunity to have students gaining such valuable experience in advice work and, not least, from the welcome publicity that this generates. Continuing this successful relationship requires that both sides continue to benefit.

We have reached the present stage through a few years of trial and adjustment. It has been essential to maintain a good working relationship with the staff who work in the Bureau.

They deal with the students when they are there and make decisions about their readiness to interview. Keeping this good relationship has been possible in part because University staff teaching on the CAB route have had to train as CAB advisers themselves and attend the Bureau. This makes good communication easier and helps us to respond to problems more quickly.

One challenge has been the inflexibility of the CAB training programme. It is designed to fit all volunteers, whatever their backgrounds. Members of staff who were qualified solicitors and barristers were barely allowed to have any prior learning accredited to reduce the training and this added to the burden on staff when getting the project up and running. Students likewise found the early stages of the training rather dull and repetitive – for example, covering the Legal Framework training pack. The volume of the training has made it difficult for students to fit in around other second year subjects.

Another major issue that we struggle with is getting the second year students sufficient time in the Bureau. It is hard to find blocks of time clear in the timetables and the Bureau can only cope with a small number coming in at a time. With restricted access to the Bureau, this has held some students back in completing assessed interviews or simply observing other interviews. We have tried to rota this ourselves in past years, but next year we will experiment with having students sign themselves up to Bureau sessions for a whole semester.

Student attendance at the Bureau can be a problem in some cases, although the involvement of University tutors makes it easier to chase up attendance. Another issue for CAB is that the qualified students tend to disappear at holiday and exam times, so they sometimes lack consistency in their rotas. Local students, however, do tend to come in where they can over

the summer vacation. At least one local student has even continued her advising after completing her 120 hours in Bureau.

Our lack of specialist knowledge on areas such as debt and benefits can prove a problem when we are training students. We address this by having short courses and, next year, specialist training from the Bureau on benefits.

One recent challenge for the Portsmouth CAB is that it has now become part of a CLAC (Community Legal Advice Centre). It has had to move premises and learn to work with a new CLAC partner (another charity which gives advice). When change like this happens, we at the University need to keep in close touch with CAB to ensure that we can continue to work with them and that we are not forgotten among other pressing worries in Bureau.

Some pleasant surprises

We had anticipated that the established advisers, many of whom were retired, might have some issues with our students arriving in Bureau. While some students have settled in better than others, they report no real problems with the existing advisers. In fact, some of the less IT-minded advisers have appreciated having our students on hand to help with databases and word-processing.

We did have a concern about students failing to complete their 120 hours in time – however, to date, no student has failed to do this.

One final pleasant surprise has been seeing some very shy and withdrawn students develop into much more confident individuals over the course of their time at CAB. By the time they get to the end of their third year, you can actually see that most of these students are ready for the next step of their legal training.

Conclusion

To anyone wishing to set up a similar project, or to work with the CAB, good contact and communication with a forward-looking CAB manager is essential. There must be clear benefits to the Bureau (which will compensate for the extra administration they will have to do) and to the students. University staff also have to be prepared to get involved with the training and workings of the Bureau – it is impossible to integrate into the curriculum otherwise. We have found, however, that the rewards for both teachers and students in this project have been significant, while the University has made a practical contribution to the Portsmouth community.